

# TURKEY-AZERBAIJAN: THE HONEYMOON IS OVER

*The relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan are often taken for granted, by both third parties and the two countries themselves. The author offers an account of the different phases the relationship has gone through in the last 15 years, pointing out the main themes that still define the partnership and concluding that the Turkish-Azeri solidarity needs to be worked on rather than assumed to be strong.*

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**O**ne nation – two countries- this became a fashionable motto for Azerbaijani and Turkish leaders to proclaim and promote throughout the 1990s. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the restoration of Azerbaijan’s independence, Turkey became the first country to recognize the sovereignty of its ‘kinship brother.’ After that, Turkey continued to provide significant economic, military, political and humanitarian assistance to Azerbaijan. Major regional economic and energy projects, once only dreamed about, became the realities and further connected the two nations. Today, bilateral relations between Baku and Ankara remain high, yet many experts believe that they have changed qualitatively. This article will look in-depth into the Azerbaijani –Turkish relations and will attempt to identify both achieved successes and challenges remaining.

### ***Elchibey’s Pan-Turkic Agenda***

The Azerbaijani-Armenian war that started in 1988 over the Azerbaijani province of Nagorno-Karabakh and the weakening of the Communist party’s influence in the region led to the creation of the nationalist movement in Azerbaijan, called Popular Front. At first, its leaders advocated purely on the Karabakh issue and were against any kind of concessions to Armenians. As the Kremlin’s power in the Caucasus further weakened, Popular Front leaders started to advocate for independence. In this drive, they mostly modeled the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, set up in 1918 by Mammad Amin Rasulzadeh and other prominent Azerbaijani intelligentsia of that period. Popular Front leaders Abulfaz Elchibey, Etibar Mammadov, Isa Gambar and Nemat Pahanli strongly opposed Moscow’s control over Azerbaijan and demanded the restoration of national sovereignty.

In 1991 Azerbaijan became an independent state. Turkey was the first country to recognize its independence and render assistance to Azerbaijani refugees. The pro-Moscow government of Ayaz Mutallibov quickly fell in May 1992, following the heavy military losses in Karabakh and in the summer of 1992 Elchibey was elected as President of the country.

Abulfaz Elchibey was a pan-Turkic nationalist. His political agenda included fighting against the “empires.” For its control over Azerbaijan for more than 200 years, the “Russian empire” was primary. The “Iranian empire” was also an issue because of its harassment and human rights abuses directed to the over 25 million ethnic Azerbaijanis in Iran. Thus, the foreign policy course of Elchibey was heavily tilted toward Ankara. This did not only reflect a sentiment or foreign policy priority of one single individual. It was rather a national choice.

When Azerbaijan restored its independence, the political elite of the country faced a strategic choice: to model the country after the Islamic Republic of Iran and thus integrate Azerbaijan into the Muslim/Asian community or model Azerbaijan after the Turkish model, integrating the country into the European community. Russia was not an option

due to high anti-Russian sentiments among the Azerbaijani population after the violent crackdown of protestors in Baku on January 20, 1990 by Russian military forces.

Azerbaijani political leadership made a conscious choice to develop the country after the Turkish model, that is, democratic governance, secular regime, and integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. Despite the fact that Azerbaijanis share the same religion with Iran (both are of the Shiia branch of Islam), linguistic and cultural similarities with Turkey were more relevant.

Under Elchibey, the bilateral relations skyrocketed. Turkish businessmen were the first ones to come to Baku and invest in the Azerbaijani economy. Understanding the language and culture of doing business in the country gave them a clear advantage over the businessmen from other countries. Turkish music and pop-culture was soaked up by Azerbaijani households. Ankara provided military training to Azeri soldiers, humanitarian assistance to the refugees and internally displaced, as well as political support. From the onset of the Karabakh conflict, Turkey, unlike Iran, condemned the Armenian aggression and subsequently closed its border with Armenia, protesting the occupation of Azerbaijani territory by Armenian forces.

Thus, one can conclude that the bilateral relations were off to a great start. In this situation, much credit goes to both Abulfaz Elchibey for his push to restore the links between the two “brother nations” and to the late Turkish President Turgut Özal. The latter’s vision for Turkey’s role in the Caucasus and Central Asia was of active participation and being a major regional player. The United States and the European Union also actively promoted the growing role of Turkey in the region, particularly to offset Russian influence in the region.

### ***Heydar Aliyev: Pragmatism and Balanced Foreign Policy***

In June 1993 a coup took place in Azerbaijan, with Colonel Suret Huseynov rebelling against the Elchibey regime and demanding his resignation. The country was at the brink of civil war. Former Politburo member and ex-head of Soviet Communist Party Heydar Aliyev was invited to Baku from Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic by President Elchibey to stabilize the situation. Elchibey subsequently fled from Baku and Aliyev was elected as the new President of the country.

Aliyev was a charismatic and experienced politician. He cleansed the country of warlords and established heavy handed policies. Cracking down on political opponents and increasing personal powers was the surest way to prevent civil war and establish stability. It worked. By 1995, the country’s domestic situation was stabilized and the first major oil contract with Western energy companies was signed (September 20, 1994). Turkey’s TPAO was also given a part in this project (After Prime Minister Tansu Çiller’s visit to Baku, the shares of the Turkish oil company in the oil contract were increased at the expense of Azerbaijani State Oil Company to 6.75 percent. This was a sign of Turkish-Azerbaijani partnership).

While serving as the chairman of Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic (the only area of Azerbaijan that borders Turkey), between 1991 and 1993, Aliyev had established warm relations with the Turkish leadership. In May 1992 this led to the opening of UMID (Hope) bridge between Turkey and Nakhchivan, which was a crucial step towards overcoming the blockade of Nakhchivan by Armenia. It increased bilateral trade and paved the way for Turkey to send humanitarian and economic aid to Azerbaijanis. Relations between Aliyev and then Turkish President Süleyman Demirel took off to a friendly start.

After becoming President of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev reversed his predecessors strictly pro-Turkish foreign policy course. He had understood that bordering sensitive areas (crossroads of Russia, Iran and Europe), Azerbaijan could not but pursue a friendly policy with all of its neighbors. Balanced foreign policy between East and the West was the only way for Azerbaijan to survive in the unstable region. Thus, Aliyev brought Azerbaijan back into the Russia-dominated Commonwealth of Independence States (CIS) and repaired relations with Iran. At the same time, he continued developing warm ties with the West, including joining NATO's Partnership for Peace program.

It should be noted that for a short period of time after Aliyev came to power, the Turkish political establishment could not cope with the fall of pan-Turkic leader Abulfaz Elchibey and the arrival of former Communist boss Heydar Aliyev to power. Among some Turkish politicians, this was regarded as geopolitical defeat for Turkey and victory for Russia. Thus, Turkey showed a cold shoulder to President Aliyev in the beginning of his presidency. Despite warm relations between Aliyev and the Turkish political elite during Aliyev's reign in Nakhchivan, his efforts to restore Azeri-Russian relations were viewed with suspicious in Ankara. It is not a coincidence that some Turkish political circles and opposition parties continued to support the Popular Front party and the former Turkish ambassador in Baku played an active role in the unsuccessful internal coup against Aliyev in 1995, led by warlord Rovshan Javadov.

Frequent government changes in Turkey in mid 1990s made it harder for Azerbaijani leadership to develop warm ties with the official Ankara. Nevertheless, by 1996 Aliyev and the Turkish political and military leadership restored a warm level of friendship that they enjoyed during Aliyev's time as the leader of Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic.

Despite the fact that Aliyev was a pragmatic leader, he paid special attention to Azerbaijani-Turkish relations and always tried to keep them above daily problems between the two nations. Thus, for him and for Demirel, Turkish-Azerbaijani relations were more important than relations between two ordinary states. It was more like a relation between two brothers. Always noticing the positive potential of the relationship and the bigger picture rendered the relationship a special partnership, though sometimes not the most pragmatic.

***“The Project of the Century”***

What eventually became the crucial vein in the two nations' partnership was the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline (BTC). President Aliyev knew that the country needed a major export route for the transportation of Caspian oil from the landlocked Azerbaijani to European markets. The existing Baku-Novorossiysk route to the Russian port on the Black sea was neither politically trustworthy nor economically efficient. Routes through Armenia and Iran were not an option due to the war and American objections, respectively. Thus, by 1996-1997 the Azerbaijani political leadership decided on the Georgian-Turkish option, a very pragmatic, but also ideologically driven decision. Connecting Azerbaijan with Turkey was the main goal of this pipeline. Building a pipeline from Baku to the Turkish port Ceyhan on the Mediterranean Sea through the territory of Georgia was a major geopolitical project. Russia and Iran immediately objected to the idea, calling it politically driven and commercially not viable. Armenian Diaspora abroad poured millions of dollars into lobbying efforts to block the construction of BTC.

Yet, with the help of the US Government, BTC pipeline became reality. The persistence of Azerbaijani leadership also played a crucial role in the implementation of the BTC project. The administration managed to defeat geopolitical pressures from Moscow and Tehran as well as from various environmentalist and human rights groups. In 1999, the presidents of Azerbaijan, Turkey, Georgia, Kazakhstan and the US signed the BTC declaration at the sidelines of the OSCE's Istanbul summit and in 2002 the presidents of Turkey, Azerbaijan and Georgia finally laid the groundwork for the construction of the \$4 billion worth pipeline. By the end of 2005 the Azeri and Georgian segments of the pipeline were completed and it is expected that the first oil through the BTC pipeline will reach Ceyhan in the first quarter of 2006.

Along with BTC, the South Caucasus gas pipeline from Baku to the Turkish city of Erzurum through the Georgian territory is also being completed and the Azeri gas from the rich Shah Deniz field will soon reach Turkish and European markets.

These two projects have elevated Azerbaijani-Turkish relations to higher levels. The two nations are being bonded not only politically and geo-strategically, but also economically. The beauty of these geopolitical masterpieces is that they connected Turkey and Azerbaijan forever. From now on, Azerbaijan's independence is firmer than ever and its security is tied to the security of Turkey.

Turkey consistently provided military assistance to Azerbaijan throughout the 1990s. Having lost the war on Karabakh, the Azerbaijani army was both humiliated and in need for re-organization. With a lack of unity, professional training and modern weaponry the Azerbaijani army was at a disadvantage in light of its arch-rival, the Armenian army. Turkish military experts trained Azeri officers both in Baku and in Turkey, and provided military expertise in the design and development of modern army structures. Hundreds of Azeri officers have graduated from Turkish military schools and starting from 1999, Azeri soldiers participated in the peacekeeping missions in Kosovo and Afghanistan under the Turkish command.

In addition to military assistance, Turkey also provided Azerbaijan with political support. Perhaps, the short conflict between Azerbaijan and Iran is the best example to illustrate Turkish political support for Azerbaijan. In the summer of 2001, Iranian gunships attacked Azeri vessels that were doing exploration works in the south of the Caspian Sea (within the framework of the Production Sharing Agreement signed between the Azeri state Oil Company and BP). Iran, claiming the fields to be in their territorial waters, attacked this vessel and later repeatedly violated the air space of Azerbaijan with its jet fighters. The situation was about to get out of control and Azerbaijan's national security was at risk. At this moment, Turkish military leadership sent several jet fighters to Baku, which participated in a symbolic parade in the capital of Azerbaijan. This gesture demonstrated backing for Azerbaijan from Turkey and resulted in the de-escalation of Iranian threats. This incident was very important for political circles in Baku.

Finally, Turkey has been instrumental in Azerbaijan solving the refugee and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) crisis. Starting from the early 1990s, Turkey provided humanitarian aid to Azeri IDPs and set up Turkish camps in central Azerbaijan to provide relief aid to the war victims. Moreover, the Turkish government has provided thousands of scholarships for Azeri students to study in Turkish universities.

### ***“Honeymoon is Over”***

Despite the high level of cooperation and relations between Baku and Ankara, the bilateral relations have been experiencing some setbacks in the last several years. These setbacks have not caused any major damage to the Azeri-Turkish relations; however demonstrate that the relations between these two brotherly nations are changing and that both governments need to work hard to sustain a high level of mutual trust and beneficial partnership.

Foremost, the change in the bilateral relations came after Ahmet Necdet Sezer became the President of Turkey. Although Turkey is not a presidential republic, this position has been crucial in building bilateral partnership. Azerbaijani-Turkish relations remained strong throughout 1990s mainly due to the high level of personal friendship between Turkish president Süleyman Demirel and President Heydar Aliyev. Unlike Demirel, who was a professional politician with a long-term vision and who was able to put long term considerations above shorter term problems that exist between the two nations, Sezer is a professional lawyer. For him, bilateral relations were to be built on the rule of law and democracy. Seeing Azerbaijan as authoritarian and corrupt, Sezer has difficulty building warm relations with Azeri authorities. The coolness in the personal relations of lawyer Sezer and pragmatic Aliyev was evident. This was perhaps a wrong approach from the side of the Turkish president, because even though issues of democracy and rule of law are very important for building the right statehood, Sezer failed to understand the complexities of the transition period in the post-Soviet republics and the necessity of time and gradual development for the eradication of corruption and other governance problems in Azerbaijan.

This coolness further increased after the government change in Turkey. In 2002 Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became the new Prime Minister of Turkey. Erdoğan, closely linked to neo-Islamist groups, pursued a different approach than the former coalition government led by Ecevit. While the Ecevit Government's policies towards Azerbaijan were very similar to those of Demirel, and even included pan-Turkic features due to the inclusion of Devlet Bahçeli the coalition, Erdoğan's foreign policy was primarily focused on economic growth and the accession of Turkey into the European Union.

It is true that Erdoğan made his first foreign trip to Baku and met with the Azerbaijani leadership. But it was also clear that Erdoğan cared less about Turkic solidarity than previous Turkish governments. Instead of seizing on the great economic and political opportunities opened up in the Caucasus and Central Asia, where Turkey could play a dominant regional role, Erdoğan, instead, decided to completely focus on the EU accession and abandon the "Eastern" part of Turkey's foreign policy. Erdoğan's agenda was focused on economic issues, and in this an area Azeri-Turkish relations have some problems. Although it was important to highlight these problems for their resolution, putting them as the priority in bilateral relations and risking damaging the high level of strategic friendship built between Baku and Ankara was a mistake.

For a long time already, Turkish businessmen were complaining about the high level of corruption, custom harassment and bureaucracy in Azerbaijan. This, they claim, makes their business operations in Baku almost impossible and many of them had to close down their businesses. Notoriously corrupt customs officers seem to create the most problems for Turkish importers and truck drivers. Besides, Azerbaijan's economy, which has become increasingly dominated by monopolies, tied to the ruling regime, posed little opportunities for investors from abroad. Erdoğan, keen to increase Turkish economic power and reduce poverty, was clear about these obstacles and urged Azerbaijani authorities to reduce barriers to free trade and economic partnership. Thus, one can conclude that the period of ideological brotherhood and pan-Turkic solidarity was over and it was time for rational, calculated relations based on economic concerns to start. The "Honeymoon" in Turkish-Azeri relations was over.

The second issue that irritated both governments was the issue of the Armenian-Turkish border. As part of the Turkey's efforts to join EU, Erdoğan began softening the Turkish stance on this issue, and seemed to be more willing to lift the trade embargo. Obviously, he was facing pressure from the U.S. and EU governments, but his willingness to restore trade with Armenia prior the liberation of the occupied Azerbaijani territories was received in Baku as a sign of treason. Politicians in Baku stated that Azerbaijan also faced many pressures on the issue of BTC, but the official Baku did not give up. Both the public and media in Azerbaijani capital condemned this intention and a group of Azerbaijani journalists organized a march to Turkey to show their dismay with these plans. Azerbaijanis claimed that lifting the blockade on Armenia would further embolden Armenians for more territorial claims on Azerbaijan and Turkey. Besides, Azerbaijanis believed that opening the border would show that Armenia can get away with the occupation of 20 percent of Azerbaijan's territory.

Although Erdoğan and his government never claimed that they would open the border, they seemed open to the discussion of this issue. The new Turkish government believed that the opening of the border would help the shattered economy of the Kars region. After facing severe objections from the Azeri side, Erdoğan backed down on this issue. Yet, it is clear in Baku that the Turkish-Azeri solidarity should not be taken for granted any more.

Finally, a thorny issue in Azeri-Turkish relations is the status of Northern Cyprus. Azerbaijan did not recognize the Republic of Northern Cyprus because it feared that this would create a dangerous precedent for the recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh as an independent republic. The Turkish side felt that the two conflicts were of different nature and that Azerbaijani political leadership was not doing enough to help Northern Cyprus.

The issue of Northern Cyprus further increased tensions in Azeri-Turkish relations in May 2004, when a scandal broke out at the session of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly in Strasbourg.

During the voting on a bill that would allow the unrecognized Northern Cyprus republic to establish its representation at the Council of Europe, all Azerbaijani delegates except one were absent. The bill was defeated and the Turkish delegation accused their Azeri "brothers" of betraying them.

The topic quickly made the headlines in the Turkish press. The influential daily *Hürriyet* accused Azerbaijan and its leadership of killing the bill and not supporting Turkish national interests. Similarly, the opposition press in Azerbaijan rushed to slam Ilham Aliyev's foreign policy and its inconsistency. "Sell-out action from the regime," exclaimed the opposition-sided daily *Yeni Musavat*.<sup>1</sup>

The scandal was connected to a statement made by Ilham Aliyev during his visit to Turkey two weeks earlier, where he said that should the referendum on the unification of Cyprus fail, Azerbaijan would be one of the first countries to render international recognition to the Turkish part of the island.

Samed Seidov, who is heading the Azerbaijani delegation to the Council of Europe, denied all accusations. "First of all, the bill was rejected by more than two dozens votes. The votes of six Azerbaijani delegates would not matter much," he told ANS TV. The head of delegation stated that the Azerbaijani delegation deliberately did not participate in the session, because it could create a precedent for the "recognition of unrecognized regimes".<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, President Ilham Aliyev kept his promise and on 27 July 2005 Azerbaijan became the first country, besides Turkey, to open direct flights to the unrecognized Republic of Northern Cyprus. The charter flight, although handled by the private

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<sup>1</sup> 2 May 2005

<sup>2</sup> ANS TV, 1 May 2005

company IMAIR, carried a huge significance for bilateral relations as well as for lifting the Turkish side of the island from economic isolation. More than 90 Turkish and Azerbaijani businessmen flew to Northern Cyprus to participate in a business forum and promote trade and business relations between the two nations.

The move came several days after a group of Azerbaijani parliamentarians visited Lefkoşa, the capital of Northern Cyprus, and held talks with the political leadership. Local analysts linked the intensification of the bilateral relations between Azerbaijan and Northern Cyprus to the visit of Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan to Baku in 2005 and his steady persuasion of the Azerbaijani leadership to take these measures. Others believed that President Aliyev was making these steps towards the Northern Republic of Cyprus to please the Turkish political leadership prior to the sensitive parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan.

The warming up of relations with Northern Cyprus caused a great deal of problems for the official Baku, because the EU, under pressure from the Cyprus Republic, threatened to end the implementation of the Neighborhood Policy with Azerbaijan.

### ***Democracy and the Relationship***

During most of the post-independence period, Turkey did not interfere with the domestic issues of Azerbaijan and more or less supported the ruling party. Some political circles in Ankara maintained relations with and even supported opposition parties in Azerbaijan. And the leaders of the opposition bloc *Azadlig* (Freedom), Ali Kerimli and Isa Gambar, frequently visited Turkey during the campaigning season in 2005. Yet, this generally has not been welcomed at the official governmental level of Turkey.

Azerbaijan's parliamentary elections in November, 2005 were met with criticism from international organizations and Western countries, but Turkey has given the voting process "silent acceptance." This position, largely driven by geopolitical and economic considerations, has angered the domestic opposition in Azerbaijan. Even though Turkey considers itself a regional power, its influence seemed relatively insignificant compared to the activities of Russia and the U.S. during the election process. Visits of the Turkish politicians to Baku were very rare and Turkish weight in the domestic political developments in Azerbaijan was almost non-existent. This comes as a surprise in light of the valuable role Turkey played in the development of Azerbaijan's democracy in the 1990s.

Turkey has always served as a model for Azerbaijan. Now that internal stability and development are being consolidated in Azerbaijan, promoting democracy in Azerbaijan should be one of the key priorities of official Ankara. With one eye on its membership bid for the European Union, Ankara indeed sent clear signals to Baku that it wanted to see democratic elections held. Both President Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül urged for greater transparency in the voting process. "Azerbaijan will be much stronger if the elections are conducted in an orderly and transparent manner," Gül said,

“Azerbaijan’s position on the international stage would be strengthened if transparent and orderly elections are held.”<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, Turkey appeared willing to go only so far in pressing its point about democratic reform. On November 7, the Turkish Foreign Ministry expressed reserved pleasure over the Azerbaijani parliamentary elections. “The official election results and reports from election observers, particularly observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe [...] will shed light on the way the elections took place,” the ministry said in a statement. In addition to a 52-member Turkish observation team that took part in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s observer mission, 100 Turkish parliamentarians and representatives of non-governmental organizations monitored the election. “Irrespective of these evaluations, the protection of tranquility and stability in Azerbaijan is our main wish,” the ministry statement concluded.

The opposition perceives this stance as one of not giving priority to the relationship. In the interview with Axis Globe, Gambar characterized Turkey’s role in Azerbaijan’s elections as “much more passive than [that of] our other neighbors.” Turkey’s goal of integration with the European Union has distracted it from events in the South Caucasus, Gambar argued.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Future Trends***

Azeri-Turkish relations are surely going through some qualitative changes. Political circles in Ankara are putting more emphasis on pragmatic and day-to-day issues such as trade and economics, rather than ideological and vague statements on the pan-Turkic brotherhood, which was the case in 1990s.

President Ilham Aliyev is paying strong attention to the relations with Turkey, but his relations with Erdoğan and Sezer are surely not as close as his father’s relations with Demirel. Thus, we can see that both sides are now taking more pragmatic positions. The recent plan of the two governments to build the Kars-Akhalkalaki railroad, which would link the railway systems of Turkey and Azerbaijan through Georgia, if implemented, will be another major regional project that would benefit all three nations. For the first time, Asia and Europe would be connected by railway.

Yet, it is also crucial that the Turkish leadership maintains the Caucasus at the center of its focus and foreign policy priorities. Turkey has great potential to be the regional power player in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Investing economically, benefiting from language and cultural links, actively participating in the mediation process of the local conflicts can turn Ankara into the regional power center. Only after being a power broker in the Caucasus and Central Asia, can Turkey aim at dominating the Middle East politics and aim at EU membership. Without the stronghold in Caucasus and Central Asia, Turkey’s bargaining stance with EU will also be very much weakened. Neglecting the

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<sup>3</sup> Eurasianet.org [http://www.eurasianet.org/azerbaijan/news/reaction\\_20051201.html](http://www.eurasianet.org/azerbaijan/news/reaction_20051201.html)

<sup>4</sup> [www.axisglobe.com](http://www.axisglobe.com)

Caucasus for the sake of EU membership will only hurt Turkey in the long-run and damage its status as the regional power.

Turkish leaders should pay frequent visits to Baku. One Turkish diplomat, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said that “it has been a long time since the foreign minister of Turkey visited Baku, while he spends most of his time in Brussels.” Lack of attention to the Caucasus can be also seen from the fact that the construction of the Turkish part of BTC is being delayed for more than a year already and no politician in Ankara seems to be worried about it.

Only by maintaining tight relations, can Azeri-Turkish brotherhood strengthen ensuring both Azerbaijan’s secure independence and Turkey’s growing role as the dominant force of the region.